

Ingrid Newton

Images from the series *Strange Country*



Most of us have a collection of family photographs of some sort, whether it is a beautifully bound leather album, a stack of envelopes stuffed into a drawer or digital images stored on a computer. Our family albums are the repository of our old selves, tangible proof of who we once were, more substantial than fleeting or sporadic memories. Yet as we age, childhood photographs of ourselves take on a mysterious quality. I look at myself in these pictures and wonder about this tiny creature, an only child often flanked by adults, gazing seriously out at the camera.

The few memories I have of these times are inextricably linked to my sense of home and family. Our childhood homes occupy a special place in our memories – idealised, linked to notions of warmth and security, bathed in a nostalgic glow (if we are lucky). These images of my old family homes, taken with my little plastic Holga camera with its blurry and brightly coloured eye, recreate the dreamlike and slightly disconnected feeling I experienced on returning after all these years. The old black and white snaps were then digitally superimposed onto the new, the joins left visible creating the effect of two worlds separated by the years, both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. The houses were still recognisable but were no longer the homes I remembered – new owners had spruced them up, concreted over the front garden, chopped down trees. ‘Never go back’, they say and they are probably right. I don’t know what I was looking for but I don’t think I found it.

I had hoped that by revisiting the old locations all my childhood memories would suddenly come flooding back to me. They proved to be maddeningly elusive. I have to admit that, as Roland Barthes pointed out in *Camera Lucida* when looking at an old picture of himself, rather than resurrecting the past, the photograph only attests to what has existed. The photographs themselves have become the memories, imprinted on my brain with repeated looking and the retelling of family stories. The memories themselves are locked away.